YEAR OF THE MMR
PART 12

# It's Not A Question Of Age But One Of Attitude

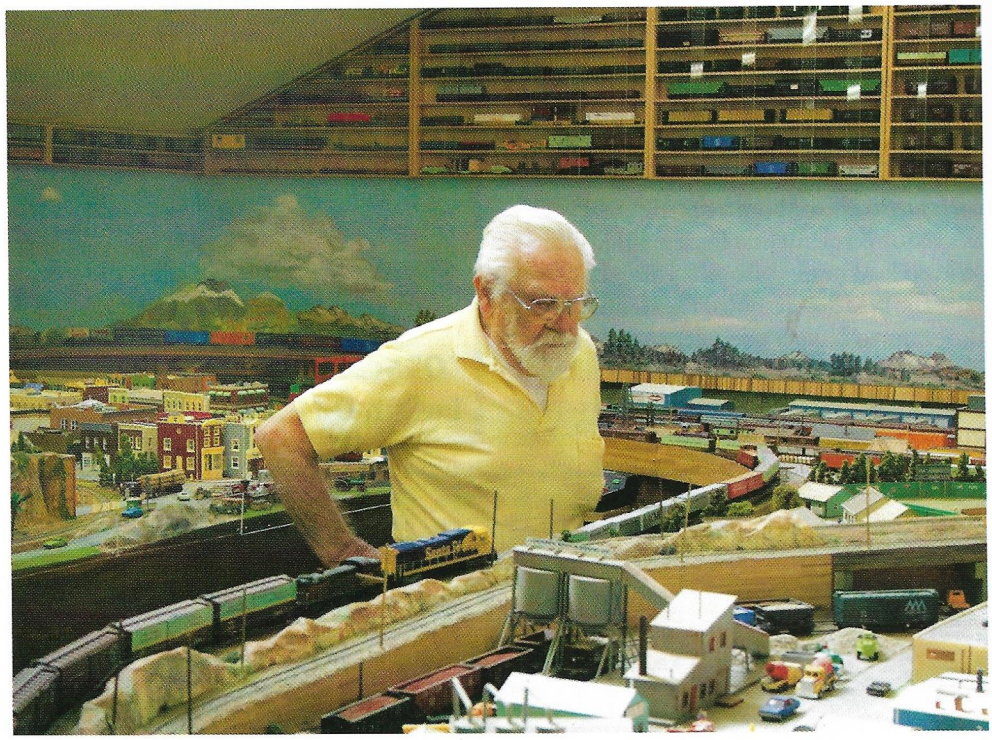
## The Will Leeds Story

article by *Jack Hamilton, MMR*

What began as a simple question about how a friend of a model railroader might get some assistance with Achievement Program assessments turned into a story of a far different nature. That simple question resulted in a success story for a modeler, for NMRA, and for the Achievement Program. The entire adventure brought new meaning to AP: Active Participation.

Will Leeds is a 93-year-old model railroader, who has been a life member of the NMRA since 1975. Will, who has had numerous careers in his life, is a meteorologist, a scientist, an educator, and a few other things to fill out his resume. Will has earned Doctorates in both Meteorology and Physical Sciences. He served his nation in the Navy during World War II and after, retiring from the Naval Reserve as a Captain. He has served his community through many volunteer and community service endeavors. He has served the hobby as a willing volunteer and mentor. Throughout his life — although he has never sought recognition for any of his efforts — he has been recognized and rewarded. Will is truly a complete man of his time and a living role model for all. To meet him and spend a few hours with him is an honor and an education.

In the 1970s, Will lived in Florida and was a very active member of the Sunshine Region and his local division. There he came to know and become friends with Howard Goodwin, now the Piedmont Division Superintendent of SER. Will and Howard worked on many projects together and shared that bond of friendship that just seems to be natural for NMRA members. Howard became very familiar with Will's skill as a modeler and the exceptional quality of the work he did. In 1979, Will moved from Florida to the Oregon coast to be closer to relatives on his wife's side of the family. Will's home is a very short distance from the rugged rocky coastline with only one house between him and the fury of the Pacific Ocean. Will says about winter on the coast, "We only get heavy ocean spray over the top of the neighbors house once in a while." At the time Will moved to Oregon,



*Above:* **Will Leeds, Master Model Railroader No. 406, surveys his empire.**

he was into his mid 70s, a time when most of us start looking for other things to do with our lives. Not Will.

First, he completed the design and self construction of a room addition to the house to provide space for the proposed layout. With the space completed, Will then developed the design of the layout to satisfy his lifetime love for trolley cars and for a realistic freelanced railroad that would reflect times and places in his life. Over about ten years, the dream became reality and the Del Padre Western came to life. The design was simple but complete, reflecting railroads and railroad operations of the mid-20th century. To incorporate reality into the Del Padre, Will scratchbuilt his structures and many of the cars that he originally used on the system. The level of detail and the imagination he displayed in his work remains obvious even after 20 years of active use on the layout. Both Di Voss and I were continuously surprised by the exquisite nature of Will's handy craft and modeling skill. Perhaps even more a tribute to his talent is that there is no hobby shop anywhere near his home and Will depended on his own ability rather than that of a manufacturer. Looking at his scratchbuilt trolley poles, complete with working erection spring assembly, or his functioning trolley fenders (later put into production by a manufacturer) revealed the consummate skill and determination of this exceptional modeler.

Uncommon to most modelers, but consistent with Will's approach to his modeling, the work space of the layout room is neat, clean, and organized. Clear plastic containers with hand lettered (in calligraphy, another of Will's well-developed skills) hold all the materials necessary for scratchbuilding or operation and maintenance of the layout. Will, even with his sight limitations, is able to put his hands on any item he may need. If you get a chance, ask Will to see his stock of parakeet feathers he asked a local pet shop owner to save for him so he could make the best model palm trees I have ever seen. His record keeping is exceptional, and for each of his scratchbuilt projects (and there are a bunch) there is a file folder with the pictures that inspired the model, the hand drawn plans, and the notes on construction. His files would put many a prototype workshop to shame.

Along the way, he still found time to volunteer his time and energy to division, regional, and national events and programs. Following the National Convention in Eugene, Oregon, in 1987, Will worked with other members of his division to first get agreement and then create and teach a course in model railroading at the local community college. The 30-hour-long course went from the very basic concepts to organized field trips to inspect and understand prototype equipment and operations. Will participated in each of the classroom and field sessions. The same level of professionalism that is obvious in his modeling work was apparent in the preparations for the course of instruction.

Today, Will is still active in the hobby although loss of central vision, because of macular degeneration, limits some of the work he can do. He operates the Del Padre Western relying heavily on sound to locate and understand the operating condition of his trains. He admits he needs help getting the derails back on track efficiently. He has an optical magnifier system that allows him to continue some construction efforts. His layout is open to any who might want to visit and share. His pastor frequently schedules layout visits for those he is counseling for stress or depression. There seems no end to what Will Leeds has done or can do to make model railroading a pleasure for himself and to provide a service to others in his community.

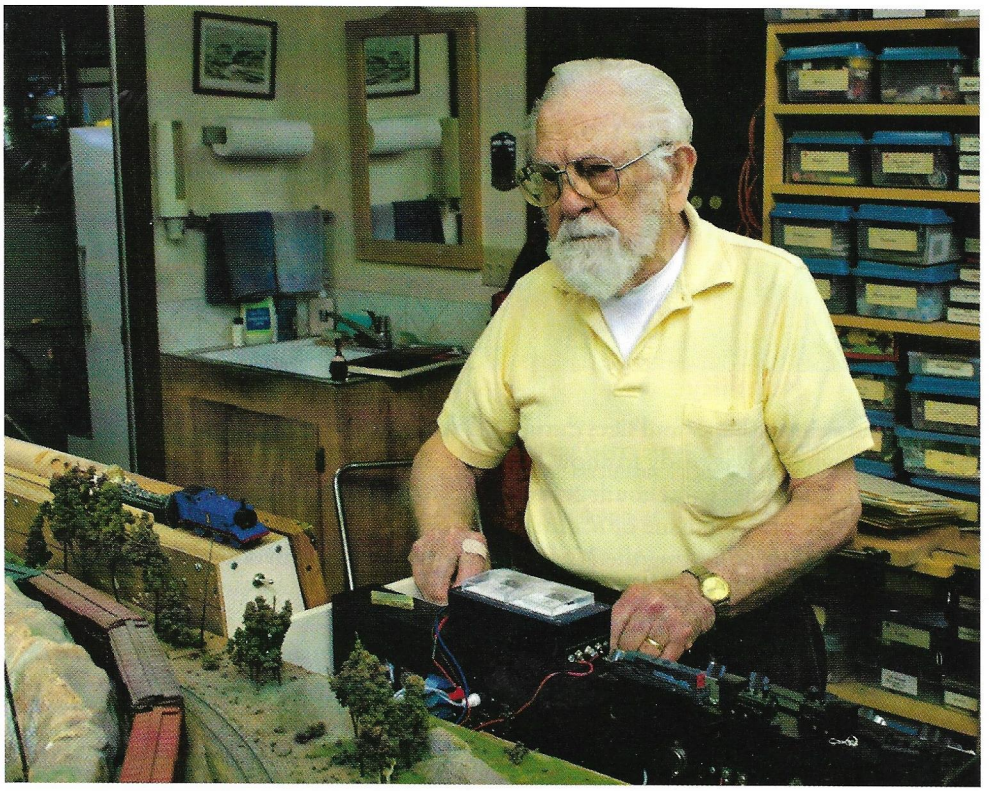
In the end, I think the visit to Will Leeds was more of a learning experience and inspiration for me (and I think Di, also) than it was a visit to work on Achievement Program recognition for Will. His knowledge of his subject matter of the things he modeled, his deep interest in completing the needed research to build a model that was prototypically accurate, and his dedication to the highest standards of quality brought home the real value of model railroading as a hobby. Will, throughout his professional life, was the consummate professional earning the highest regard and recognition of his peers for his performance. Will has brought that same degree of professionalism to model railroading and has set standards of performance we could all aspire to achieve.

On top of all the fun and enjoyment of inspecting Will's layout and models, we also got in a short field trip to wander along the coast adjacent to his home to look for some wild yarrow from which Will creates exceptionally accurate evergreens.

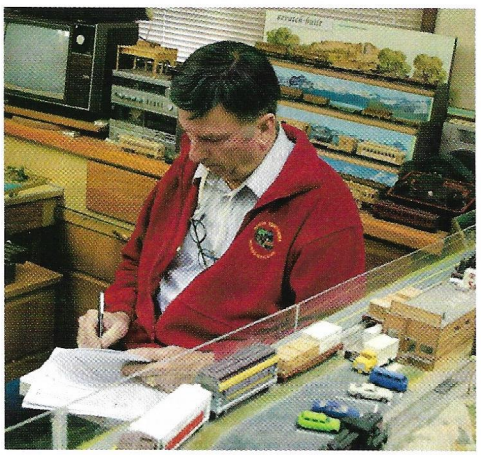
The wind was up a bit, the sea was running a bit high, and we were a bit too early in the season for yarrow. Unfortunately, we had to retreat to Will's place and "suffer" through the scones that Maggie, Will's wife, had baked for us. Sometimes you just have to suffer to get the job done.

*Marvin has earned the following certificates: Master Builder—Motive Power, Master Builder—Cars, Master Builder—Structures, Master Builder—Scenery, Model Railroad Engineer—Civil, Model Railroad Engineer—Electrical, and Association Volunteer.*

***Below:*** **Will Leeds is at the throttle. Behind Will are some examples of his organized work space: plastic bins each labeled with calligraphy as to their contents.**



***Below:*** **Didrik Voss, MMR, works on an assessment, studying the detailed paperwork prepared by the skilful Will Leeds.**



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